

S-E-C-R-E-T

25 April 1966

STAFF NOTE

SUBJECT: A Crisis Ahead in Nigeria?

1. Nigeria's Federal Military Government is facing some formidable problems which will very soon require hard decisions. In the three months since the coup General Ironsi's regime has coasted on a wave of popularity. His caretaker regime of army officers and civil servants has kept the machinery of government in motion albeit without inspiration or much of a program. Little more was required of them. Ironsi has cashed in on accumulated popular discontent with the corrupt, tribally nepotistic politicians of the old regime by attributing most of Nigeria's current ills to the "politicians."

2. Now the euphoria is fading, perhaps more quickly than Ironsi had imagined. In particular a serious nation-wide inflation of prices of basic foods, i.e., yams, maize, and beans is hurting the urban masses, many of whom live on bare subsistence levels. In response to the rising clamor of the press, trade unions, and others, the Federal Government has banned exports of basic foodstuffs, and issued a statement attributing the shortage to disturbances in late 1965 in some food growing regions, and to

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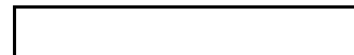
continuing activities of secret cults. Some Nigerians find the government action insufficient and the explanation inadequate, and are demanding a national marketing authority with the power to establish rigid price controls.

3. Since the coup, sporadic unorganized violence has continued to trouble the Western Region, and more organized criminal bands have terrorized parts of the Eastern Region. Although these do not yet constitute much of a threat to internal political stability, the cohesiveness of the Nigerian Army is a matter of some concern. If the Army were united behind the Ironsi regime, provincial disorders and urban food shortages might not loom so large.

4. But there is considerable evidence of discontent and lack of discipline among the military. Much of the unrest centers around the eventual fate of those middle-grade officers who carried out the January coup. These coup leaders, still held in detention, are regarded as national heroes by some and as mutinous assassins by others. As most of the coup-makers are Ibos and the victims were non-Ibos, strong tribal feelings will probably be aroused whatever their fate. Pressures on Ironsi from both camps are mounting and he will soon have to reach a decision.

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5. Ironsi may be able to tamp down discontent within the Army by taking firm action one way or the other on his prisoners, and he may be able to preserve his favorable image among the civilians by holding the line on food prices, but if he continues to drift, he could be out of office fairly soon. Other army officers have observed how easy it is to overthrow a government, and some are motivated by revenge, ideals, or personal ambitions. The overthrow of Ironsi could bring on a much more radical regime, particularly if urban discontent mounts, and if the successors are among those who believe that Ironsi's government was merely a variation of the conservative Balewa regime which failed to grapple with Nigeria's social problems. It is somewhat more likely, however, that Ironsi's downfall would lead to a prolonged period of internal confusion, particularly if the shaky structure of army discipline shatters along lines of regional, tribal, or personal allegiances. In sum, the Nigerian government appears to be sliding into a crisis.



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